



REVIEWING THE PANDEMIC AS THE CATALYST FOR RENEWED ORGANISATIONAL AGILITY: THE EMERGING AGENDA FOR HRM ACTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the effect of coronavirus out-break on organizational responses with special reference to their agility. Strategic agility is the capability to review and constantly renew organizational functions or in entirety. Though disruptive changes occur on many times on the corporate horizon but the present pandemic has tested and renewed organizational strategy agility in stricter ways. The growing intensity of the pandemic and resultant complexity in business environment has led rising salience of agility. Agility is not just a top-management strategy but applies universally to all functions of management practices, behaviors and skills having a cumulative effect on a firm's strategy. Research suggests that three major firm characteristics that are key enablers of strategic agility: strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity and collective commitment. Assuming these as the foundation stones, I have identified certain Organisational agile enablers and inhibitors, which coupled with specific skills, and practices are driving agility in HR practices. I further add some more dimensions to the HR agility based on my keen observations from pandemic struck organizations. This study postulates a précis of skills; behaviours and capabilities agile teams need in order to best contribute to the strategic agility and fine tune HR practices to manage the novel temperament of the pandemic hit workplace.

KEYWORDS: Agile management, HRM, pandemic, strategic agility, employee wellbeing, virtual workplace

Methodology:

This is a research article. The search for relevant information, data, studies and articles was made in Google scholar, Online digital libraries resources by Emerald publishing and Elsevier and Semantic scholar. To obtain relevant information searches were done using a combination of terms and keywords related to the title of the article. Live webinars hosted by top firms such as LinkedIn were attended to gain a more one on one understanding based on what the top management believes about the organizational dynamics and how it they were coping with the new challenges. Such sources can be treated as primary sources. Since this situation is unique, there exists a huge paucity of studies on the pandemic impact on organizations; strategic agility and HRM ideas and facts were also drawn from similar studies during other health pandemics and the same would also reflect in the review of literature. The study is based on authentic qualitative research design.

Practical Implications:

The identified literature reports a comprehensive ways in which organizations around the world have responded, and how it has the potential to have a long-term impact on their products and people policies with special reference to agility. Strategic agility across all functions has become more observable performance outcome today, than ever. I have suggested some emerging trends in strategic agility that can be a precursor for future HR policies such as remote leadership, employee wellbeing, remote hiring a few more. The contribution of the article is its assessment of agile framework suggesting ways in which HR practices can be enhanced.

1.1 Introduction:

Corporations around the world seem more immune to the virus compared to the human race. The Corona virus that continues to send shock waves around the world has brought out the worst as well as the best in organizations. Just like many other decade defining management moments, the pandemic has forced the corporate ecosystem into a speedy chrysalis. What, when and how each organization emerges as, shall decided their fates and also how the new work place would look like.

Probably it can be seen as a forced experimentation on the employees of the world with regards to strategic agility. Strategic agility is timely decision making in pursuance of business goals, with shorter and shorter sprints. As the world commenced a mass "lockdown" we continue to see corporations flexing their creative muscle and adapting. Within a few weeks, the world was replete with organizations that became flatter, leaner and more empathetic. Even pre-pandemic in industries such as knowledge, information and communication technology, strategic agility was a key determinant of performance, and now as other teams are trying to achieve it, the study fills in a necessary void in understanding.

Response time of many organizations was knee-jerk. The size of the company dint matter, what mattered was the resilience to react. Companies such as Google were already in the final stage of creating remote work policies while other tech giants were quick enough to switch to the distributed work force model within days. Offices may have dried up, but work is still getting off the table, but instead

of boardrooms and cabins, in the living rooms of employees.

Agility is many things, and one way is to view it, is as managerial mindset, a dharma. Managers must obey three tenets of this dharma:

- Ability to look for patterns
- Look at the organization outside to inside, not just from inside
- Cultivate and harness organizational curiosity.

1.2. Review of Literature:

Revolutionary business operations systems keep arriving depending on the times in which the business operates and its environment. In 1910, Ford pioneered and capitalized hierarchical machine-like model by installing a very workable management method based on Taylor's scientific management. It did wonders for the corporation. Over decades, gradually technology made enterprises more and more digital, and then the hierarchical model began to stick out like a sore thumb. Talent wars, democratization of organizations, disruptive change and new technologies rendered such management models obsolete. And now instead of treating organizations and people as machines, we treat organizations as "organisms", and hence came the expectation of "Agility". The concept of Agility was based on the urgent need for outcomes demanding:

- Accountable Teams
- Bias to action, cast out boxes and hierarchies
- Leadership is biased to action and implementation
- Hyper- Responsive to changes
- Resource Fluidity
- Demolishing silos
- Exit from bureaucratic structures
- Focus on technical excellence rather than administrative excellence

Moving to its application in strategy, strategic agility has been defined as "the ability to exploit, or create to one's advantage changing patterns of resource deployment in a thoughtful and purposeful but also fast and nimble way rather than remain hostage to stable pre-set plans and existing business models" (Doz & Kosonen, 2007b). Agility has emerged as a present day determinant of competitive advantage and more so of survival during the pandemic.

In order to achieve overall strategic agility, agility is broken down to transcend to each and every function of management so that a more holistic responses could emerge from cross-functional teams, linking it to HRM in the process.

Boselie, Brewster, & Paauwe (2009) by means of their theorizing and research have demonstrated many ways in which effective human resources management practices can play a formidable role in the formulation and implementation of a firm's strategy, thereby gaining an edge over competition. More recent research has created a strong case for strategic HRM activities must focus their attention to strategic agility, by-passing the traditional methods (Nisula & Kianto, 2015).

Doz and Kosonen (2008) point out that, strategic agility makes a departure from previous strategic management systems as it views strategy as "a process that enables a "redirection and/or reinvention of the core business without losing momentum".

Emerging trends as seen during cases studies are clearly showing signs, as previously suggested by Ananthram & Nankervis (2013) for renewal of HR strategies in the light of: role and synergies of senior management, promoting, adaptive and curious leadership, performance management, talent attraction, and up-skilling programs for employees organisation wide.

The concept of strategic agility focuses on: prompt and productive change not just change. The characteristics of "prompt and productive" are consistent with the varied definitions of agility as advanced by many theorists and researchers. This paper emphasizes the significance of agility in present times and the implications it holds for HRM, suggesting ways in which improvisation can be achieved. These suggestions are based on the emerging employee centric approaches and sudden change of business tracks that have emerged in the past two months, observed across different enterprises. Prior work has focused on the standard conflicts in strategic management with juxtapositioning it against change, flexibility and teamwork. The works of Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014 are significant in this regard. Similar conflicts are visible in HRM; with it being a potential factor affecting an organization's strategic agility there is a need to address such conflicts. Theorists Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, (1999) and Hadida, Tarvainen, & Rose, (2015), have also proposed that organizational improvisation has an effect on strategic agility. The article builds on the confirmed notions and aims to fill the gap that exists about precise inter-linkages between HRM, agile teams and strategic agility that could feed improvisation in a cyclic self-sustained manner.

2.1 Agility in the face of "Infodemic": Creation of a virtual workplace

According to Prof. Tomas Chamorro, managers exist in complex environments that are dense with information. Though this time around the crisis reversed the flow of information, dense information became scarce and erratic.



Many experts believe that the pandemic was accompanied with an "infodemic". Governments sanctioned lockdown at lightening speed, without managers hav-

ing enough time to co-ordinate across vendors, employees, supply chains and customers, creating the lack of information on multiple levels. Managers had to be quick; they had to make calls based on their creative impulse, skill and experience.

Everyone hopped on to the only wagon left, the alternative- virtual workplace. Telework got an instant nod though with numerous dilemmas that, managers had already pointed out over decades. Pre -Pandemic only 7 % of the people work from home in the USA, as managers did not really favour the option, for their inherent "boundary issue". Not just managers, but employees too feared if they would ever be able to keep the boundaries sterile. Each employee plays multiple roles-mainly falling into, personal, home and work. When work and home merge into one then all temporal, cognitive and relational shifts cease to exist, making people stressed and probably uncomfortable to work virtually on an ongoing basis. Earlier, bosses would not tick the alternative workspace check box, but now with the entire C-suites locked down, there seemed no option but to see through the veil of denial. Organizations are now staked over the Internet and have encouraged managers embracing a more empathetic approach. All this transpired in the lack of appropriate preparation. Does mental preparedness to embrace change score over preparation in a crisis, most certainly yes.

2.2 Inter-linkages between HRM and Strategic agility: Momentum and sustaining a Virtual Organisation:

Strategic agility is what we arrive at from the culmination of coherent behaviours, duality of organizational structure and an ambidextrous temperament of the organization. According to Doz and Kosonen, there are three "mega capability vectors"- strategic sensitivity, resource fluidity, and collective commitment. Info-graphic 1.0 expresses a framework for understanding contextual agility.

During the crisis, the immediate gains of being virtually operational, cost effective and "agile" are colossal. While there is renewed acceptance to virtual work, there is no denying that is an equally robust stressor. People world over have reported stress, exhaustion and lack of sleep. Organizations have been quick to fill in the void of interaction- and while some organizations have come up with virtual coffee breaks some have come to terms with employees working at unorthodox work hours. If work is being done and stress is at a minimum, people seem to be ok with that!

LinkedIn has approached the crisis in more real terms. Aarti Thapar, Director, Customer success, claims that though the transition to remote work was smooth, the real challenge lies in maintaining remote working over a continued period of time. She claims that the key for them to maintain agility within the firm lies in Role modeling: working without any assumptions and wellness realization. Similarly, Katherine Coombes, Talent Acquisition APAC & China LinkedIn, emphasizes on the role of learning. Termed "Lunch and Learn", the management has shortlisted three programs: Building resilience, time management while working from home and effective online communication. All employees can take the course at the time blocs of their preference but the discussion happens collectively so that people can borrow unique leanings. Aarti Thapar continues to stress on the undeniable pivot of remote work; "well being", where teams have come up with creative ways to substitute face-to-face interaction by running challenges such as photo of the day which would range from favorite art of the house, view from work desk, lunch for the day or a dress up theme, all executed online with winners. It is the "well being" focus of such initiatives that not only encourage agility but also rally employees and encourage remote leadership.

There can be no better real time experiment than the pandemic for grooming young leaders and inspiring present ones; there can never be a better time than this to understand that you just like lightening Change strikes, and could be initiated by something that can't even be seen by the naked eye. The world of change has no assumptions. Mismanaged change becomes crisis. Organizations that have created good sales figures and retained their employees seem to have made the most of organizational curiosity, renewed POV and creative "black-box" decision-making.

- The emergence of collaborative task culture, across organizations. The fragmented teams can steer through modeling themselves on the task culture, with each set of people fine-tuning it as per their needs.
- The corporate world seemed to have conquered is the fear of a "bad online meeting". Remote meetings have become the norm and most effective meetings are- using tools, not over-inviting, more punctual and with sharper agendas.
- There has been emergence and almost an instant acceptance of "new norms". Managers have been encouraging their employees to communicate their "norms". Their norms are their work schedules, and working strategy. Once each and every working member communicates his/ her norms, there is wider acceptance and clarity on when to expect communication. The norms are the new "suitable blocks of time". In the virtual workspace there can't be an "in time", "meet me in 5" or "out time", thus in order to sustain their empathetic team spirit- many organization have enabled the creation of online collaborative platforms to enable employees to share ideas and experiments.

- Peer coaching has more benefits than what meets the eye; it becomes more relevant to elevate people from the feeling of loneliness and isolation. Peer coaching or the buddy system, is employee to employee, meaning that people can connect on more real terms to make their work lives better and their personal lives may become better as an emotional by-product. There is implied camaraderie as they face similar challenges and stressors. Organizations are pursuing the dream of “Effective remote leader” which seems a reality now.

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Though in addition to those who are working, there are also employees who are not working, and the fear of being jobless looms large on them. Organizations such as CEAT, and Aditya Birla group, India have relying on effective communication with such workforce by means of sharing relevant information, training modules and other applicable content.

3.1 Agile Transitions: “Survival Sprints”:

While all business may not have been able to adapt within minimum TAT for re-design also called “sprint” in strategic agility, owing to nature of business or production systems, some of them have come up with ideas that can truly be seen as a testament to their agility. Each firm that was functioning under locked down jurisdiction, did not have much to choose from- either alter delivery of products and services or re-use existing facilities for other in-demand products?

Living up to its proverbial tagline line “Just do it” Nike had its game all figured out. At the every onset of the outbreak, Nike in China, had to shut down 4000-5000 of its retail outlets, struck hard by both: pandemic and infodemic. Nike management sprang into action and engaged with its customers directly through digital workouts. Sales were enthusiastic with a triple digit growth. A leading cosmetic company in China, the epicenter of the pandemic, decided to take the social media route to encourage online buying, only to be rewarded by a spectacular 120% growth in figures. Sale teams had their Cinderella moment, and transformed into social media influencers. Incentives were high, adding an extra dose of motivation.

Not far behind were the vineyards of Napa Valley who discontinued physical tours and wine tasting and replaced them with online wine tasting lessons combining them with online purchases and other events. Businesses from diverse segments have been super agile to take a sharp U-turn from what they had been doing for years. Overnight expertise and competence blossomed out of creativity. There was hardly a business that did not have an app avatar, but now most business have pumped up a lot more into their apps.

3.2: Nexus between: HRM and “survival sprints”

Larger part of work in organizations today is being done remotely, which brings to the fore the questions of teams and their strategic agility. Past researches have established that the strategic capacity of an organisation is hugely dependent on how agile its teams are. This implies that teams must be well- defined, composed, effectuated, equipped, trained and motivate to execute well thought and timely decisions, and most of the onus for such tasks lies within the scope of the HRM function.

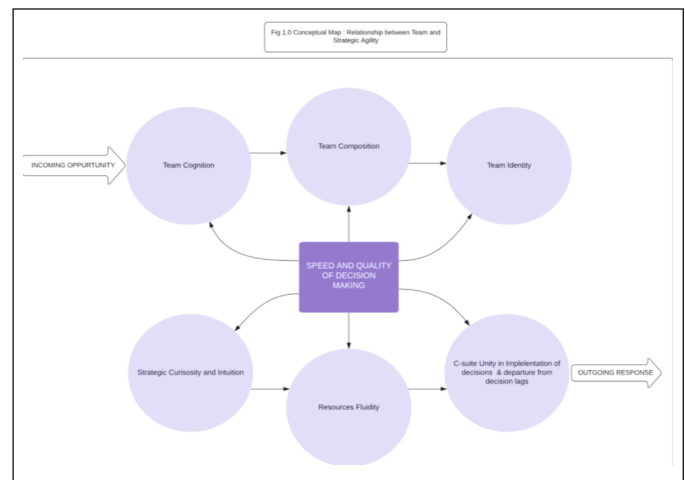
In her work on “high-velocity” teams, Eisenhardt (1990, 1997, 1999, 2013) points out that difference in organizational performances, are hugely affected by variances among top-level agile teams, even when they operate in similar environments. Therefore, there does exist a direct relationship between the effectiveness of teams and the degree of success of their entrepreneurial firms.

Fig. 1, represents a conceptual framework that depicts the links between teams and strategic agility through the notion of dynamics around opportunism and speed of decision-making or responsiveness. The three broad elements of teams as explained below are connected to each other from a profound psychological standpoint that will alternatively vary from context to context and situation to situation. For instance, team formation can impact quality of team cognition thereby undermining, team identity. It is easier to understand the relationships, by taking a holistic approach:

- **Team Formation:** Team formation begins when different individuals are brought together to work collaboratively in a team, all united by a common goal.
- **Team Cognition:** Team cognition comprises of the collective cognitive processes of team members, including learning, planning, reasoning,

decision-making, problem solving, remembering, designing, and assessing situations.

- **Team Identity:** Team identity is developing a clear and shared vision on the team's purpose, the role of each team member and develop the willingness to achieve team's goal.



All three team traits listed above also throw light on the values of scrum an important tenet of Agility- Commitment, focus, openness, mutual-respect and courage. These form the core values of each scrum team member, contributing to their agility.

The role and contribution towards such team is manifold. Apart from skill, success and experience many managers working in the traditional matrix structures or teams are unable to win their due lacking in the right communication skills. The negotiation skills needed in team interactions are much different from those needed in customer or third party interactions. Negotiators who are able to arrive at solutions instead of stalemates are the ones Strategically agile organizations are looking for. HR management of such firms needs to create good reward systems for this category of good negotiators, who are stepping out defensive mindsets. A well device reward system shall ensure a steady supply of adaptive leadership that believes in openness in dialogue and move towards better and timely solutions.

Executive development programs need to focus on: delivery discipline, mutual forbearance, and collective commitment. The major obstructions to such behaviours could be many such as desire for power and autonomy be senior executives, organizational structure, need to for stability, role of power play and absence of trust or team identity to name a few. It is extremely critical for the HR management to overcome such and similar barriers by creating a wider acceptance and willingness of such issues. Encouragement to proper dialogue and developing a sense of collective motivators are some significant pre-cursors.

3.3 The emerging agenda for HRM agility: during and post pandemic

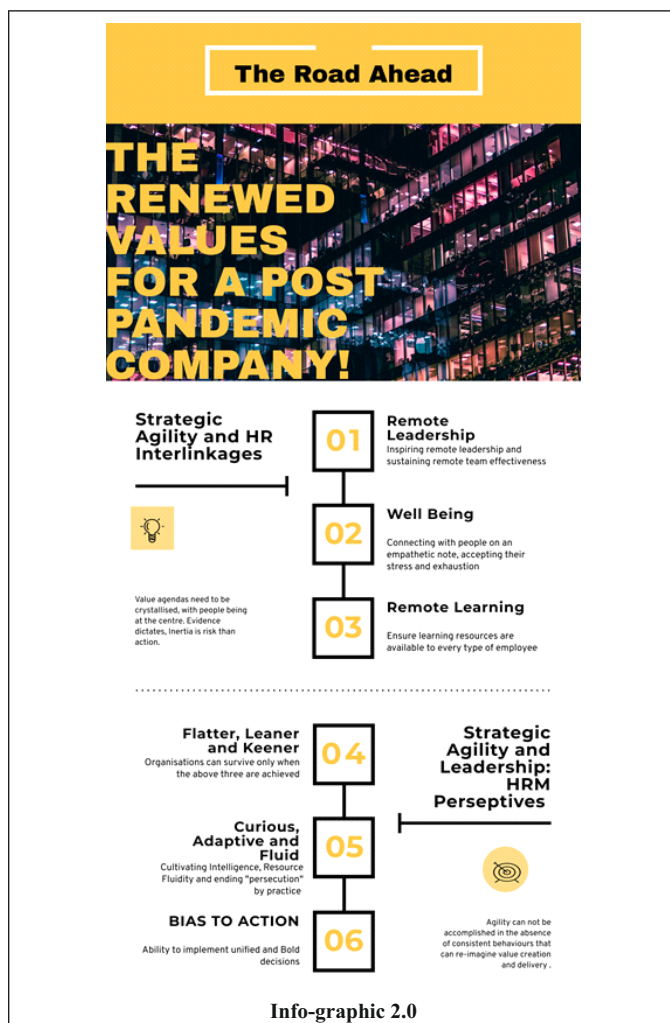
At its existential core Agile strategic management calls for: primacy to people, departure from excessive documentation, abandonment of functional silos and cross- functional collaboration. The pandemic emerged as a North Star by brutally testing strategic agility and by amplifying organizational adrenaline. Turbo charged decision-making, prompt crystallization of value agendas, real and increased autonomy to people, overcoming the hazard of inertia, vindication for flatter, faster and non-hierarchical work structures and higher degree of alignment across fragmented groups. Strategic agility can take many forms but what is visible in the response plans of organizations is cumulative strategic agility, resulting from all the version of it. Many experts view Agile and anarchy as partners, and probably they are not wrong completely. Scrum and kanban have worked wonders in the short-run for many previously agile organizations, creating a significant case in point for others to take cue.

Companies like Twitter announced that the virtual workplace is not temporary for them, rather they plan to proceed with it long term. While some may not go such an extent, organizations such as Shopify and Twitter are not alone or isolated examples. Rajesh Gopitnathan, CEO of TCS, was one of the first companies in India to announce remote working would be a long-term policy. The cost effectiveness of the model seems hard to ignore. Going a step further, Zuckerberg has already announced that Facebook shall be “remote hiring”. A long-term paradigm shift will call for changes in laws and addressing issues pertaining to data security.

Human resource management shall continue to be a strategic partner yet, it may be in for a rude shock unless it is ready to incorporate the dictates of the times. Human resource managers need to be on the same page as the overall leadership to create an organizational ecosystem that:

- 1. Teams that are Resilient to its core:** The word corporate resilience shall imply the ability of managers/ teams to absorb surprises thrown at them (such as the present pandemic) and failures without resentment, without inhibition of action in the future. A few bad decision shall not de-motivate them or effect the creative quality of their future decisions. The nudges by the hyper-competitive workspace shall be diverse in their configuration and may require renewal of responses.
- 2. Develop strategic sensitivity and curiosity:** Organizations will need to unlearn quickly. Old routines and behaviours or defensive mechanism may not be effective anymore. Employees need to come up with new creative responses and behaviours and thereby develop a holistic and organisation wide understanding of hyper-change and hyper- competition.
- 3. Unity and credibility:** Leadership, more than ever, needs to be united and credible. They key lies in sustaining remote work and on a larger plain sustaining strategic and functional agility.
- 4. Encouraging “T-Shaped” expertise:** Nonaka has advocated the merits of T-shaped expertise, which implies the managers must posses the skill to provide original knowledge and expertise while matching it to the knowledge and expertise of team members. He suggests that team members should have a very specific area of true expertise, and a broader knowledge of related areas of expertise to connect with all working members of the team. The T shaped expertise shall challenge term inertia, enrich quality of work, making collective work an effective assortment of varied expertise.
- 5. Effective assessment of cognitive diversity:** HR managers need to pin the task of cognitive diversity to their agendas, virtual agile teams need to be cognitive diverse and a very specific barometer of their assessment is extremely critical to make them effective, as already the teams are working away from each other physically.

Info-graphic 2.0 summarizes some important observations of the article. Agility borrows from uniqueness; hence the emergence of industry and organisation specific agile human resource practices shall be an assortment that time shall curate. Though there is no denying that, If Strategic Agility 1.0 meant fast and fruitful change, Strategic agility 2.0 would imply turbo charged fruitful change.



4. Conclusions and limitations:

This paper started with the ambition to view how strategic agility came in handy for managers when the pandemic loomed large with challenges of the worst kind. In this attempt, the article started to build a bridge from the strategic agility literature –largely rooted in the field of strategic management- moving towards emerging HR trends, organizational response, citing certain case examples of well-known firms and then linking them to the HR field, via focusing on tenets, skills, inhibitors and enablers that contribute to the strategic agility. There is no denying that to a certain degree this study covers only a few dimensions of a multi-dimensional topic, future researcher can use this information to build and explore additional Agility and HRM levers that would be equally relevant.

It may take a while, a year or two for researchers to be able to thoughtfully examine the purposive elements of the competence area and/or related areas. Contextualization will also be extremely critical in order to develop further understanding of the subject. For those organizations that have not been very successful in adjusting to the pandemic struck world with worthy business decision, the road ahead clearly signals a careful stepwise operational transition towards an adaptive understanding of present issues and renewing the organizational systems in which they manage time, money and human assets.

They would need to pay close attention to enablers and inhibitors to arrive at the right balance and move in the direction of agility. Organisation will be left out if they are unable to transition towards a flatter structure aiming at attaining horizontal collaboration over vertical compliance. HR managers will have to move towards a holistic and whole hearted acceptance of supple job designs, well-being considerations in work assignments, team management methods to name a few.

The objective is to highlight a few cornerstones HR practices and policies can contribute to strategic agility and have been enlisted under the heading “The emerging agenda”. Even though the impression of leadership at successful agile organizations created by reading the article may seem to appear as “super human”, the truth remains that effective agile leadership is borne out of sustaining efforts, making use of accumulated wisdom from curiosity and delivery discipline.

Not forgetting some, but by a large measure the premise and effectiveness' of strategic agility for any firm depends not just on effective behaviors at the top management alone, but of each every employee across different levels, in varying capacity. Collectively they can serve as enablers. Strategic agility is vision and behaviour that must be shared by the critical mass of an organisation.

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